

## **Attuning Alterity: An Ethics of Attunement for Activist Research**

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Mountaintop removal mining (MTR) is a major ethical issue emerging from Appalachia. As an environmental, economic, health, safety, and political issue, this form of mining has sparked much protest since it began in the 1960s, and increased in the 1990s. In 2011, the EPA officially acknowledged the hazards of MTR:

Mountaintop mining is a form of surface coal mining in which explosives are used to access coal seams, generating large volumes of waste that bury adjacent streams. ...It is estimated that almost 2,000 miles of Appalachian headwater streams have been buried by mountaintop coal mining (Kika).

In this article, I critically examine the possibilities and limitations of academic activism vis-à-vis MTR in order to offer an ethical model of research and activism centered on the rhetorical act of attunement. In Fall 2007, I was inspired by an undergraduate course in Appalachian Literature to conduct interviews with families affected by mountaintop removal mining in Eastern Kentucky. The article you read today was written five years later, after greater reflection on that journey.

### **Attuning Academic Activism**

Reflecting on her experiences with academic researchers, indigenous writer Linda Tuhiwai Smith expresses the frustration that, “At a common sense level research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs” (3). As we contemplate the ethical implications of academic research, we are wise to question the purpose and impact of our work—especially negative impacts on groups who are frequently targets of academic study. Many researchers have expressed concern about this injustice by inviting participants into

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their methodologies, including them in the development of research questions, data collection, and representations (Cushman; Ezzy; Naples and Sachs; Smith; Sullivan and Porter). I agree that, in order to promote more ethical research interactions, methodological concerns are very important. But in our push to practice more reciprocal methodologies, I worry that our research remains too self-seeking—offering entrance to participants only in ways that satisfy the researchers’ (and the larger academy’s) interests and investments. In this essay, I offer an ethical model of research and activism that moves beyond methodology, expanding a theory of research-engagement centered on the rhetorical act of attunement.

Attunement, I argue, is a generative metaphor for activist research. The term has been cited often in the Humanities to signal a special kind of rhetorical listening that attends to difference, respect, collaboration, and community engagement. In music, tuning connotes recognition of rhythm and a movement towards harmony not merely through sounds, but also through vibrations that are felt as much as they are heard. The impact of sound and vibration on the body creates felt senses that permeate past the skin, often beyond consciousness—passing through and embedding into bodily memory, inspiring response. As a practice, then, attunement hinges on one’s ability to acknowledge and adjust within an environment. Taking Appalachia as my primary example in this essay, I advocate “attunement” as an ethical research methodology that holds academic researchers responsible for adjustment alongside groups struggling against alterity.

Appalachia is a place to which scholars have historically “paid attention,” but much less frequently “attuned themselves.” Photographic research from the Great Depression, folkloric research from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, literacy ethnographies from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and contemporary debates on mountaintop removal mining, tend to emphasize the region’s Otherness and call us to merely “pay more attention.” Yet in such efforts to “pay attention” to the struggles of Appalachia, scholars and “outsiders” often exacerbate the problems, making it difficult for the region to move beyond historical stereotypes of what Appalachia “needs.” Drawing on theories of affect, alterity, and everyday life, I suggest implications for attunement in ethical engagement, especially for scholars and researchers invested in alterity studies and activist research. For Appalachia in particular, an ethics of attunement encourages ethnographers to work beyond the attention-driven models of current research, and acknowledge 1) the fragmented, ephemeral nature of identity and experience, and 2) our response-ability to attune ourselves to, rather than merely “pay attention” to, groups who are Othered.

One historical challenge for ethnographers of the region has been to acknowledge identity (and identity politics) without trapping the “subjects” of our

research into static categories. Yet to classify those things (to “pay attention to” them) often regenerates them as stereotypes that are difficult to move beyond. It situates Appalachia as a problem-space that needs fixing, especially from outsiders who can “see beyond” local problems and enter with outside solutions. Despite the important contributions of Appalachian ethnographers like Shirley Brice Heath and Victoria Purcell-Gates, ethnographic research rarely acknowledges the ethnographer’s situatedness and affectedness vis-à-vis the lives of the individuals that they study. Heath’s *Ways with Words*, for example, begins with a short acknowledgement of her significant time (nine years) in the Piedmont Carolinas of the Appalachian Highlands, and then launches into economic and geographic descriptions of the region. Purcell-Gates, in her research on Urban Appalachian literacy in Cincinnati, similarly begins by acknowledging the problem of her subjects’ illiteracy, and then quickly goes on describes the economic and cultural aspects of the city. Both highlight important issues in hopes of catalyzing social change, and yet both do so by citing a problem and imploring outsiders to solve it. Attunement works differently because it implies a response-ability on the part of researchers to listen before speaking—to adapt efforts to our surroundings in generous, less self-focused ways, which is to say, in ways that maintain the integrity of the spaces we enter.

By offering a metaphor of attunement, I hope to emphasize a dynamic and ethical form of response—dynamic because it remains in constant, emergent flux, and ethical because it requires an ability and desire to respond. Attunement moves beyond the musical metaphor of tuning because it requires: first, an awareness of emerging rhythms in a particular, dynamic environment; second, a desire to allow those rhythms to pass into and through the body; third, an openness that invites this tenuous “passing” to affect the body; and fourth, a willingness to respond and contribute to the environment in light of those affectations. Absorbed and released rather than possessed, the metaphor of rhythm here reminds us of flight—vibrations enter, and pass through. It is in the passing that memory clings to perceived information in order for it to be repeated later as ethical habit. As rhythms pass through the body, they form memorized habits of perception, interaction, and response. It is here that such rhythmic practices make possible an embodied model of ethics and responsibility that is useful to contemporary concerns about ethical academic engagement.<sup>1</sup> While tuning signals manipulation, attunement reminds us of generosity in sacrifice: one’s ability to respond with/in an environment. In a sense, we are always attuning ourselves—to available materials, historical tensions, social relations, and rhetorical possibilities. Ethical attunement is a generative metaphor

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “engagement” rather than activism here to suggest the response-ability on the part of the researcher to be transformed (rather than merely to uphold a stance).

because it implies an affective, tonal response-ability that seeks harmony, or at least an openness to change.

### **Rhetorical Response-Ability in a Postmodern Key**

Postmodern theory is often criticized for its inability to attune individuals into collective action around shared causes. In his discussion of postmodernism and ethics, Richard Kearney argues that, “We reach a point in the endless spiral of undecidability where each one of us is obliged to make an ethical decision, to say: *here I stand...* Here and now, in the face of the postmodern logic of interminable deferment and infinite regress, of floating signifiers and vanishing signifieds, here and now I face an *other* who demands of me an ethical response” (qtd. in Pennycook 136). In *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations* (2010), Diane Davis argues for a similar attunement to ethical response, despite the multiple possibilities that exist for action. Davis argues that all interactions first require a meeting—a “coming together” that also requires a “coming against”—of beings, whether physical or virtual, visual or sensational. Her book is devoted to the emergence of the individual via the recognition of the Other—an interaction that lies at the core of being. Drawing on Levinas, Davis argues that in the recognition of the Other we cease to exist as essentialized or essentializable subjects. In every meeting of two faces (or, I would include, bodies, voices, texts, and our imagined senses of people on the other end of the computer screen), there lies an important failure to essentialize—a “*failure* of identification, an interruption in narcissistic appropriation” (34). It is in this failure that social feeling becomes possible—not because we identify with one another, but because we always fail to—exposing us to our shared exposedness and making us capable of empathy, of “demonstrating concern for another finite existent” (35).

Davis’ ethical argument is that our rhetorics are always already essentializing; we can never fully “understand” the experiences of others and therefore, we disserve them by interpolating or essentializing them. She argues that there are no essential selves, which is to say, that our subjectivities are always nonreciprocal and nonbridgeable: “The ‘responsibilities of rhetoric,’ involve both a determination to analyze and use the available means of persuasion *and* a willingness to attend—relentlessly, imprudently—to the inessential solidarity that makes rhetorical practice both necessary and possible” (143). Because we are deconstructed by our very relationships with others, at the core of our being lies a “response-ability” to respond to others. Affect precedes language, rhetoric, identity, and community and yet, senses of community are always already at work in our earliest interactions, where the simple act of *meeting* inspires response—a response-ability.

To foster response-ability, there must first be a meeting and within that meeting, a willingness to be transformed. Postmodern ethics emerges from that essential inability to always be “morally right” or “sure” about the intentions and implications of another being’s actions. This leads us to a larger problem haunting activism in the academy: when does academic activism become moral and rigid rather than ethical and reflexive? When does the academic activist trample those with less power to make their own voices heard in the fight for particular causes? Such questions remind us to consider our positions as academics not only as potentially transformative and supportive, but also as potentially rigid, demanding, and self-seeking—especially when an academic’s perspective is thought to matter more than the views of people not trained in the academy. While I believe there is incredible potential for academic activism to matter in the world, I forward a metaphor of attuned ethics to remind us of our responsibility to those with different opinions, facing perhaps very different consequences. Alastair Pennycook provides a particularly lucid description of such “fluid” ethics: “This is not a normative morality, a fixed body of codes to follow...only confrontation with the real ethics of hard decisions [that] do not occur outside relations of power” (137). Once again citing Kearney, Pennycook encourages us to pursue “the ethical demand to imagine *otherwise*” (138).

Yet in recognition of the emergent, ephemeral, fragmented body, how do we decide what is it about a group facing Otherness—a group like Appalachians—that we ought attune ourselves to? Issues of dialect seem particularly appropriate to concerns about tonality, as do concerns about the instability of Appalachia’s cultural identity. Both play an important role in the region’s ethnographic research, as well they should. However, taking the road less traveled, I want to discuss a particular “pressure point” of ethical debate currently circulating in the region: mountaintop removal mining. Issues of sound, place, space, and power emerge in these debates, offering a metaphor for attuned research. Exploring these mergers, I move towards an embodied model of attunement that can inspire more ethical ethnographic research approaches.

### **Attunements with/in an Appalachian “Soundscape”**

Nowhere are issues of such ethical attunement more “audible” in Appalachia than in the debates concerning mountaintop removal mining (MTR). I took the image to the right during a road-trip that I can only describe as a “drive of academic activism.” After reading about the many families displaced by MTR in a collection titled, *Missing*



*Mountains*, I felt a personal need to write and write and write about the problem, spreading the word to other academics. Encouraged by my undergraduate English professor, Sherry Cook Stanforth, I drove on highways for four hours to Black Mountain near Whitesburg, Kentucky; ascended a number of winding gravel roads; and met Sam and Evelyn Gilbert, the generous owners of the mountainside adjacent to the one pictured here. Now a long stretch of grey dust lined up horizontally against the sky, this mountain range has been the couple's home for over three decades. They fell in love and raised their children here. "The mountains," Sam explained, "have been a big part of our life. To see them destroyed is sort of like having someone you're dear to die. It's just unbelievable. I don't like to use the word *hate*, but that's probably the only one appropriate for the way I feel towards these companies that do this just for greed. I believe we need new restrictions and laws."

The opportunity to view this phenomenon is rare. Sam, a retired strip miner, had just closed dispute with the Upper Cumberland River Coal Company regarding their proposal to place a hollow fill and sedimentation pond 250 feet behind his house, when I arrived to visit him and his wife. The proximity of the fill and sedimentation pond to Sam's home – which is to say, the risk the pond posed to the health of Sam's wife and children – inspired him to invite others to see the devastation for themselves. But for people beyond the mountains, this form of mining and its effects on the local population are practically invisible. Back at home, switching on my office lights, making coffee, and typing on this laptop remove me so completely from MTR practices that activism becomes that much more difficult—and complicated. As the industry proclaims: "Coal keeps the lights on." For the state of Kentucky, their claim is literally true: "There are 21 major coal-burning electric generating plants in Kentucky, and almost all (92.7%) of Kentucky's electricity is generated from coal."<sup>2</sup> And despite the extreme importance of Sam and Evelyn Gilbert's story, such statistics increase the complexity of "taking a side" in the MTR debate. Take, for instance, the first professional documentary on MTR screened at the 2011 Sundance film festival, which sensationalizes the debate. I have summarized the language [with images described in brackets] deployed in the film's trailer, which circulates online<sup>3</sup>:

Deep in the majestic Appalachian mountains...[scenes of nature]... live families that have been here for generations...[farms tucked into hollows; black out] and now they are under attack... [exploding mountainsides]... by the US coal industry... [mountaintop lunar landscapes]... Massey Energy does more mountaintop removal

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<sup>2</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> edition Pocket Guide of "Kentucky Coal Facts" on the website for *Kentucky Coal*: <http://www.kentuckycoal.org/documents/Coal%20Facts%202010--11th%20Edition.pub.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See the film's official website for more details: <http://thelastmountainmovie.com/>

mining than any other company... [man wipes soot from the side of his home]... but one community...[police, citizens, capital building]... is fighting back...[statistics on water contamination and brain tumors]... for their very survival... [windfarms, green mountains—alternatives]... The powerful true story... [corporations and money]... of the last Appalachian mountain... [more lunar-scaped mountains, poster-making resistance]... and the people trying to save it... [global images of coal's influence; everyone is connected to the problem]...The Last Mountain.

Despite compelling concerns about the changing landscape of the region, I am weary to immediately agree and be moved by cries against MTR. For groups resisting mountaintop removal mining don't merely resist big, bad corporations from the bottom-up (as the language of this trailer suggests), but also enact their own kind of power—a power of collectivism that de-emphasizes the diversity of this conflict-space. In other words, it is my contention that collectivism, even resistant collectivism, is also power-driven. Power-driven arguments offered by local residence in favor of MTR go something like this: *I may be against MTR, but I still need my laptop! I may love these mountains I grew up in, but I still need to provide for my family, and mining is the only profitable work in our community.* As an outsider traveling into a small Kentucky community, I observed both strong and subtle tensions surrounding MTR. One town member explained that if outsiders were to come in waving an anti-mountaintop-removal flag, even those opposing it would feel uncomfortable in joining the cause because of the pressure to support neighbors over outsiders, especially when so many neighbors are coal miners.

Yet I am also skeptical of this kind of postmodern fragmentation. It is tempting to view Foucauldian postmodern theory that “power is everywhere” as devastating to the collective rally cries of anti-MTR activists who hope so much that Appalachian voices will be respected and heard in these debates. Rather than brush aside Foucault's contributions as unhelpful to struggling or resisting groups, we might (inspired by Davis) view resistance as the power relations of bodies *without* essential interiority but nevertheless *with* the potential to perform and create action in the world. In “The Body of the Condemned,” Foucault situates bodies within larger networks of power relations: “...One should decipher [the power exercised on the body] in a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess” (174).<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of the townspeople who cautioned me against waving an anti-MTR flag, the best solution may not be

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<sup>4</sup> According to Jeffrey Nealon in *Foucault beyond Foucault* (2008), this kind of individuality risks justifying the capitalist reappropriation of a notion like individuality. By making you feel like an individual capable of infinite independence, corporations create illustrations of choice that nevertheless encourage only particular kinds of action (i.e. to buy products that make you feel unique and revolutionary).

diehard activism, but rather to bring awareness to those who don't know that the problem exists, and to help disrespected or unvoiced voices be heard. As a researcher in this scene, I attuned myself to the people who lived in communities impacted by MTR, and negotiated my activist stance against MTR alongside a desire to respect those communities.

Attunement, in this way, can be understood as awareness catalyzed by rhetorical choices. As one author from *Missing Mountains*, Maurice Manning, expressed in a phone interview with me, "Language, and the culture that is associated with the language, is the greatest natural resource in eastern Kentucky. ...The human relationship to the landscape is what produces the language, in my opinion." Such awareness inspires the rhetorical choices he makes in his poetry, which is academic, activist, and ethical:

You like  
that kind of landscape, alright, you like it  
right good, the beauty, the treachery;  
it's what your life has been and all  
it's ever going to be: a rise, a fall, and after that, you  
have good reason to want another rise (*Missing Mountains* 74-75).

The relationship between language and landscape in this poem reveals not only the ecological and geological impacts of mountaintop removal, but also the cultural and historical importance of the mountains to Appalachian people.

Rhetoric, in these ways, is essential to an ethics of attunement because it reveals the subtleties of power and at the same time enacts a powerful activism of its own. For Nikolas Rose, viewing resistance as a bottom-up individualistic action is just as limited as viewing power as a one-way, top-down form of domination. Instead, he argues that we should "examine the ways in which creativity arises out of the situation of human beings engaged in particular relations of force and meaning, and what is made out of the possibilities of that location" (278). We might start—like Maurice Manning—by acknowledging the connections between 1) conceptions of particular groups and localities, and 2) governmental justifications for acting in particular ways in certain (perceptively economically powerless) localities, and not in others. If events (like local resistance to government-sponsored mountaintop removal mining) erode established structures (like historical conceptions of the worthlessness of Appalachian peoples) into multiplicities (55), it is precisely this kind of multiplicity that also makes collective action so difficult.

Both pro- and anti-MTR collectivism emphasizes binary tension that strips away local<sup>5</sup> diversity, conflict, and flux: any given town in Appalachia is home to supporters or activists who are torn by economic hardship, family heritage in coal mining, the need for electricity (within and of course, beyond Appalachia), connections to the mountains, needs for consistently clean water, and many other struggles. In other words, at the conflict-site between individual “stance” and national “movement”—at the moment, for instance, that a person says she is for or against MTR—there occurs an erasure of diversity, partiality, anxiety, and neighborly tension. In such moments of activist erasure, we might attune ourselves to these tensions, remembering that the self is always unstable and partial, and at the same time embedded with/in a diversity of pressures to act and respond.



*These images reflect the imposed binarisms on MTR activism both within and outside Appalachia, as well as the rhetorical strategies used by both pro- and anti-MTR camps.*

For Rose, the way out of this problem is to rely on our shared status as subjects of government (284). I agree that it is helpful to consider the role of government in the struggles surrounding MTR; however, one problem with locating our *unity* in government-oppression is the limitations it places in terms of actual rhetorical influence. Both “sides” of the MTR debate favour political, governmental intervention (though the coal companies are more frequently the “winners” in terms of land-rights). But what about the rhetorical influences of the cultural and societal

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<sup>5</sup> By “local” here, I mean within the individual—despite the always-affective interactions between persons, materials, memories, histories, stories, perceptions, libidinal desires, etc.

propaganda composed by both “sides” of the debate? Coal companies (whose major web presences include [www.americaspower.org](http://www.americaspower.org) and [www.friendsofcoal.org](http://www.friendsofcoal.org)) famously circulate the phrase “Coal Keeps the Lights On” on billboards and bumper stickers, and at the annual college football “Friends of Coal” Bowl. In fact, as I drove out of Whitesburg, Kentucky one day, a powerful image struck me: on the side of a coal truck were the words, “The Power to Move Mountains.” People fighting against mountaintop removal re-propagate such slogans for negative publicity, as visible in the billboard above that reads: “The Power to Move Mountains... belongs to God.” These examples from print culture illustrate the multiple tensions surrounding mountaintop removal, and reflect Jenny Edbauer Rice’s notion of viral rhetorical ecologies—bringing us back to metaphors of “environmental” adaptation and response.

### **Embodied Affect in a Practice of Attunement**

This essay is not meant to offer a solution to the complexities rendered by MTR, but to reveal the embodied aspects of activism and suggest its implications for ethnographic research within and beyond Appalachia. Because we have bodies, and spaces are embodied, the ways we think are shaped by the spaces and places we occupy in the world. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson’s idea that embodied experience grounds metaphor (32), Malcolm McCullough’s suggests that “humans assimilate [to] their surroundings by means of mentally constructed representations of spatial relationships” (33). Embodiment, in this sense, is not just a state of being, but a phenomenon of emergent reactions within given environments: “The body gives scale, shape, and orientation to our picture of ourselves in the world” (29); which is to say, the body as well as the mind perceives spatially the persistent possibilities for action (48). While McCullough examines the relationship between space and embodiment, Nikolas Rose critically examines the role that vision plays in ethical engagements (ethnographic and otherwise), arguing that we must “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (190).

Yet Rose’s metaphor of vision is perhaps too limiting here. Although attunement implies an exclusivity to sound, it perhaps does a more inclusive job of accounting for dynamic aspects of experience and response than the traditional aural notion of *tuning*. In his critique of metaphoric “scapes” (i.e. landscapes and soundscapes) in philosophies of perception and sensation, Tim Ingold worries that our reliance on individual senses (like sight or sound) “slices up” the world in ways that do not account for the flexible relationship between humans and their environs. Rather than falling into the same traps as visual studies scholars have found themselves in, he encourages us to conceptualize sound not as the object but as “the medium of our perception” (138). Sound, he explains, is what we hear *in* (138): “We do not touch

the wind, but touch in it; we do not see sunshine, but see in it; we do not hear rain, but hear in it” (138). Using a metaphor of breathing—in which wind becomes momentarily part of the body—Ingold suggests that “the wind is not so much embodied as the body [is] *enwinded*” (139). The body, in other words, is constantly “swept up” in the currents of sensory media.

Sound then, like wind, is not a static object of perception, but a movement of coming and going that makes the body *ensounded* (139). Similar to my earlier discussion of rhythm and the movement of sound “passing through” the body, this change in perception has implications for attuned awareness and response—as well as for violence. To imagine sound as a static perception connotes a violent erasure of its emergent and “passing” movements. Ingold describes the experience as analogous to flying a kite: “Though the flyer’s feet may be firmly planted on the spot, it is not the wind that keeps them there. Likewise, the sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear listeners away, causing them to surrender to its movement. It requires an effort to stay in place. And this effort pulls against sound rather than harmonising with it. Place confinement, in short, is a form of deafness” (139). Though perhaps a strange example, the notion of sound “sweeping” a person away from any given spot reveals the violence of *emplacing* sensation—“paying attention” to only one sense at a time, and failing to acknowledge the dynamic embodiment of sensation. Against emplacement (or landscape), then, Ingold recognizes movement: “Sound flows, as wind blows, along irregular, winding paths, and the places it describes are like eddies, formed by a circular movement around rather than a fixed location within. To follow sound, that is to listen, is to wander the same paths” (139).

Much opens up when we apply Ingold’s defense of movement and sensory embodiment to Michelle Comstock and Mary E. Hocks’s work on sonic literacy. Drawing on Canadian composer and educator, R. Murray Schafer, they emphasize the importance of attuning oneself to the cultural soundscapes within which we are embedded: “Listening is an art, a conscious process of observing and defining sound. And like the art of writing, it is affected by one’s place in and knowledge of a particular sonic environment as much as one’s previous experiences with sonic forms” (7). Comstock and Hocks’s notion of sonic literacy acknowledges affect and movement within efforts to define and observe sound. Attuning ourselves to sensations and perceptions—and their embodiment within memory—guides us towards a dynamic understanding of human experience in space.

Space is never static. In Chapter Seven of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau stands at the top of the World Trade Center and considers how that view allows him to read the city as one collective, dis/unified image. He calls the city “a

text” that can be read, though differently from the top of the Trade Center than when walking through the city’s streets:

The ordinary practitioners of the city...make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. ...The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other (93).

At the level of experience, then, the overt structures of urban space reference panoptic socioeconomic and political powers that are always only representative and phantasmic—never top-down in a merely hierarchical sense. Yes, the city is planned and calculated (by the state, no less), but no one power-holder stands at the top of the World Trade Center—or in the case of MTR, at the top of the mountain—to wield sole power over others. Everyday urban life, like the complicated decisions of Appalachians embedded in issues of MTR, offers opportunities for disruption. The visual/spatial systems (or panopticons) that describe larger movements within Appalachia must constantly attune themselves to what de Certeau calls the present, discrete “pedestrian speech acts” that define individual experience. The individual, “*migrational*, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (93). Place, in this sense, is composed of “displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form [its]... moving layers” (108).

### **A Model of Ethnographic Attunement**

Drawing on De Certeau’s theories on the embeddedness of everyday life in urban space, Ralph Cintron offers an ethnographic approach that brings us close to the understanding of attunement I advance here. Though his research was not conducted in Appalachia, Cintron’s study of a Latino community on the outskirts of Chicago offers a model of ethnographic attunement useful to those of us invested in alterity studies. His focus on migration is especially useful to Appalachian Studies—which must answer to decades of out-migration from the mountains, and the complications of identity and politics that follow such moves. Most importantly, Cintron’s postmodern approach has a way of acknowledging the affectations of ethnography that shape the researcher as he moves within and among the communities he studies.

*Angels’ Town* offers an ethnographic shift from Shirley Brice Heath to Michel De Certeau, relying on De Certeau’s idea of everyday rhetorics as a way of acknowledging the flux and inbetweenness of experience, and the necessity of the

ethnographer to account for this flux: “I hope to further emphasize my skepticism about the essentializing instinct that lies behind such phrases as 'a culture' or 'a community' and the effort to 'interpret a culture.' Such phrases are empty, such efforts futile” (11-12). Cintron goes on to call such efforts an attempt to create a “stable *logos*” (12), explaining that “any account of the reality we inhabit must include an account of that imaginary life that flows at the greatest depths of reality” (129). Like the pedestrian speech acts embedded in de Certeau’s *migrational* city, the people at the center of ethnographic study—including researchers themselves—are more flexible, diverse, and embedded than we can possibly explain in written words.

Cintron acknowledges this erasure, calling his book a fieldsite that works as its own “ordering agent” (230): “The real fieldsite observed by a knowledge-making ethnographer eventually becomes the fieldsite of a text, which is the only fieldsite an audience comes to know” (8). All knowledge, he argues, “is, in part, autobiographical and... the fieldsite in very subtle ways, not literally so, is also autobiographical” (8). Calling his own writing and representations into question, he describes his approach as one based on flux: “In a strong sense, this text is about the conditions of in-betweenness, an almost unlocatable place” (12). In-betweenness—with its allusions to affect<sup>6</sup>—gets at the heart of ethical rhetorical work. It acknowledges collectivism and identity politics without trapping the “subjects” of ethnography into those categories.

One method for describing and acknowledging such in-betweenness is Cintron’s move to reveal his own spatial locations throughout the text. As he describes the economic and racial divide of Angelstown’s ethnically diverse urban population, and its primarily Caucasian suburban citizens, he acknowledges his own situatedness. For example, he notes that the newly-constructed Transportation Center (built to offer the suburban populations of Angelstown a gentrified path to the Chicago train system) also backs up against territory patrolled by the Almighty Latin Kings Nation. This structural pressure point is, for Cintron, “a kind of unintentional, symbolic border, an obstacle separating and yet linking two sorts of peoples” (49). Even more relevant to our interest in the spatial position of the ethnographer is the location of Cintron’s apartment during his research stays: “In fact, the apartment where I slept bordered the other side of the levee, and the freight trains at night would screech slowly and endlessly as they made a big turn before heading to points further west or on the straight shot east to Chicago” (49). This apartment will be the site that inspires his larger theoretical offerings: “At any rate, as I wrote my thoughts on the discourses of measurement in Don Angel’s hot little apartment, the fertile possibilities of the term became clearer and clearer” (216). In his attunement to the

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<sup>6</sup> “Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (Gregg and Seigworth 52).

visual, spatial, and aural impacts of the Transportation Center, the weather, the living conditions of his participants, and even his own sleep, Cintron reminds us that experience is always “passing through”—moving in-between our bodies in a flux of sensation and perception. Attunement matters in our retellings of experience because as a practice, it reminds us that no ethnographic “subject” (including the researcher) is ever stable.

Methodologically, rural sociologists Nancy Naples and Carolyn Sachs call researchers to recognize the “power dynamics that infuse ethnographic encounters” (201). They hope that researchers will generate greater sensitivity toward their participants’ cultural locations and visualize themselves as participants as well, rather than as neutral observers (208). Naples and Sachs remind us that researchers’ social positions influence their questions and analyses (196), in a way similar to Patricia Sullivan and James Porter in *Opening Spaces* (1997), who encourage researchers to question not only their own social positions, but also the disciplinary, cultural, and personal motivations of their study. Understanding methodology as more than “merely a means to something else” (12), Sullivan and Porter depict the researchers’ questions and analyses as rhetorical activities that are guided by factors like local need, accessibility, convenience, and institutional bureaucracy, among other things (9). Such important considerations remind researchers of their personal embeddedness within larger institutional ecologies which may, by their very allegiances, work against the potentially separate needs and concerns of research participants: the opposite of attunement.

An attuned model of academic engagement needs more than inclusive research methodologies. While methodological reciprocity plays an important role in questioning bias, other strategies of fairness in research are needed to help alleviate the gap between academic interests and community needs. Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi have responded to this need by encouraging researchers to consider the ethical implications of reciprocity. Ethical reciprocity, they argue, may require that participants are not only part of the methodology of the research study (i.e. that they help develop and answer research questions, or filter research results and representations), but also that *their* needs, which may exist beyond the confines of the study, are also met. They encourage researchers to consider “ways participants might benefit from their relationships with researchers outside the confines of the research study's focus” (296). Such insights catalyze attunement in research, which situates reciprocity as a methodological and ethical concern.

Methodology and ethics are mutually informing practices that are "ecological" in their constant interplay. Stated another way, the choice to listen and respond to the needs of participants (without only hearing our own needs as researchers and writers)

is both ethical and methodological. An important part of ethical research, then, is to allow methodological approaches and theories to develop from what Powell and Takayoshi call the ethical "negotiation and renegotiation" of needs, and the "definition and redefinition" of the roles assigned to participants and researchers. My own contention is that ethnographic participants should be invited to participate in research methodology, but that each person should ultimately decide to what extent he or she wants to take on research tasks and responsibilities. Too often, of course, the problem is the opposite, and researchers do not attune themselves to participants by asking how they can benefit the lives of the people that they study—beyond the confines of their research. Ethical research begins with the researcher first asking participants about their needs, then negotiating those needs with the desired outcomes of research: a process of attunement.

There are important ethical implications of this attunement for ethnographers. For Cintron, a childhood of relative privilege in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas (as the son of a Puerto Rican Ph.D. horticulturalist) created human distances that inspired his writing: "One of the desires [of this book] is to make amends for the distances that placed our family on that hill, many more families below, and precious few families five hundred miles to the north. Surely, if this book is able to make amends, it is because of certain negotiating skills that were cultivated under conditions of difference and distance" (6). Attunement to such differences is ethical, in that it recognizes perceived positionality and its impact on respect. Cintron asks: "How does one "create respect under conditions of little or no respect?" (x), which is an ethical question because it implies *response*.

Researchers are too quick to call this kind of work auto-ethnographic because of its gesture towards the researcher's affectations. By calling it "auto-ethnography," we imply that a binary between interested and uninterested observers – an analytic versus evocative "mode" – is even possible. The label of auto-ethnography only reinforces the idea that there can be a "pure," disinterested, unaffected ethnography in the first place. Appalachian ethnographies in particular are frequently susceptible to this pressure to remain on the outside. If to be Appalachian is to own a history of stereotyped oppression—and many citable contemporary oppressions—it is no surprise that an affective and affected approach like Cintron's is not frequently upheld.

### **Forwarding Attunement in Academic Activism**

By offering an ethics of attunement, I don't mean to increase our anxieties as researchers. Attunement lessens our anxiety by inviting us to consider the ways we are embedded in affective experiences that, like in our relationship to weather, are

multiple and emergent, and impossible to perceive in their entirety. It is impossible for us to always “pay attention” to everything around us. We might hear birds, or feel gratitude for the warmth of the sun at particular moments, but as we perceive such sensations, a million other elements remain unregistered and unperceived—perhaps affecting us, perhaps not. In traditional models of ethnographic research, we are experts at tuning in, at the expense of attuning ourselves.

Bruce Horner has critiqued approaches that rely on the myth of the “lone ethnographer” who views culture as a bounded set of patterned behaviors and shared meanings that a researcher could “taint” upon arrival to the static “scene.” Such models made detachment necessary (Cushman 925). Yet at the same time, Horner’s alternative suggestion – that we follow a “critical ethnography” centered on activism – works too harshly in the other direction. Appalachian ethnographers, and especially those writing about mountaintop removal mining, engage in a kind of activist research that implies *stance*: for or against MTR. Such an either-or perspective limits the stories that can emerge from their work. In response to Horner, Ellen Cushman cites Cintron as an example of a postmodern ethnographer that is not activist, yet is still (what I would call) attuned: “Ethnographies must be responsive to research settings and participants’ needs, but that does not mean that one kind of ethnography (or methodology, for that matter) will suit all studies” (929). At the heart of Cushman’s reflections is a reliance on response—what I have called a response-ability to attune ourselves.

It is here that we see important ethical implications of attunement for research. First, if perceptions and environmental rhythms make bodies remain always in flux, then ethnographers and alterity theorists should acknowledge the body as an intra-individual space wherein ethical concerns “pass through” and are harbored, discarded, or negotiated. Second, if ethics are acquired and negotiated through a kind of tonal-training that then becomes habitual, rhetoricians have an important role to play in ethical ethnographic research. The language, behaviors, and “rhythms” that are constantly “passing through” individuals have rhetorical flexibility that we are responsible for hearing, protecting, analyzing, questioning, sponsoring, and circulating. By attuning ourselves to such tonal ethics, we challenge static alterity (i.e. the myth of the “lone researcher” or stable protestor) while embracing its embodied processes, attuning our contemporary ethnographic work to the passing rhythms and vibrations of experience.

Places struggling against alterity need scholars who maintain a commitment to developing ethical research methodologies that acknowledge the hybridity, fluidity, and performativity of place and identity. As a field that extensively argues for the importance of place, Appalachian Studies faces seemingly impossible struggles

against ephemeral, abstract powers. And yet, place-based research and advocacy need not fall into a local versus global dichotomy: “Virtually every place on the globe has long been shaped by and continues to participate in networks of relationships that stretch far beyond its boundaries” (Fisher and Smith 269). As a rhetorician, I believe that theories of public rhetoric can offer symbolic, affective, and material strategies to groups facing ubiquitous powers like globalization. “Place” is not a default, location-driven network, but a growing space or “scene” of relationships that inspire response and response-ability. This does not mean that social responsibility is only ephemeral or abstract, like the ever-expanding scope of globalization. Rather, I see places as simultaneously local and abstract, enmeshed in complex networks of relationality between people, objects, representations, words, emotions, and materials. For example, material borders—architecture, geography, or the layout of a neighborhood’s resources—determine to what extent neighbors feel a sense of community. Current research in philanthropy and urban development adds that individuals living within economically diverse neighborhoods are much more likely to volunteer and donate their time and money to non-profit organizations and community programs and centers.<sup>7</sup> These examples suggest the complex relations that constitute “place.” Drawing our attention to such interactions, I define “place” here as “above all a collective product, experience, and possibility” (Fisher and Smith 267), emphasizing the relational interactions of place and space – local and global –in order to challenge the idea that globalized powers are “out there,” ungraspable and unchangeable in their might.

Rhetoric, or the potential of language to create change, offers strategies for harnessing the emotive and symbolic powers of place—especially for academics, researchers, and lay people supporting the voices and opinions of Othered peoples. Rhetoric, in other words, can help advocates, artists, and residents build “strategic lateral relationships among peoples, places, and ideas that transcend social, spatial, and ideological barricades” (Fisher and Smith 283). Using the idea of attunement rhetorically, we can build networked collaborations of support for communities facing histories of oppression and negative representation.

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<sup>7</sup> See 24.16 issue of *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 2012.

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